2: Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

CHAPTER V

THE COURTSHIP AND WEDDING

WHENEVER I asked a man or a woman "How did you come to marry?" the response was always the same. After an embarrassed laugh, the person would say, "Oh, it's so long ago. I have forgotten. I have not had time to remember such foolish things." Then would come a quick look at me from dark eyes that never seemed to lose their brilliance even when the broad face was sagging, deeply lined with the years. "You really want to know?" First it came haltingly; then soon the man would drop the harness he was mending or the woman would lay aside her distaff to give undivided attention to the story. I needed to do little prompting. My interruptions were usually questions about attitudes toward courtship or marriage in general.

There was never any self-pity, even among those women who had been stolen. Even for them something bright had flashed across their days. And for all—"It was so long ago, I thought I had forgotten. There has been much work." From all their reminiscences, stripped of their meager romance, there emerged the village conception of marriage.

Marriage was expected of young people in Dragalevtsy and was an affair which they usually handled in a matter-of-fact way. The peasant youth did not trouble himself as to whether he should or should not marry. He simply concerned himself, sometimes much and sometimes little, about whom to marry.

A woman who had not married by her twenty-fifth year was considered an old maid. People began to wag their heads and ask: "Why doesn't Vesela marry? She's a nice looking girl. There must be something wrong with her about which we do not know." As a matter of fact, in 1937 there was only one peasant girl over twenty-five un-

2:Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

582 208 [554] married in Dragalevtsy. Because she had a physical deformity her parents had given up all hope of marrying her off since they knew she would be unable to attend properly to her housework and field work. During the first World War there were two old maids in the village who had not been chosen for marriage because each of them had a goiter. A doctor with the German forces cured the goiters and these two unmarried women became desirable prospects, one of them marrying a priest's son in Sofia, one of the highest prizes a village girl could capture in her matrimonial venture.

[208] [562] 581 Since public opinion made life miserable for unmarried women, even a girl of independent temperament looked upon marriage as an inevitable event, especially if she stayed in the village. With men it was different. They could choose to remain unmarried and not lose prestige in the community. People only said: "Well, Asen simply doesn't want to marry. He's a bit shy of skirts, you know."

The young men to whom I talked were outspoken in regard to those qualities which they looked for in choosing a mate: good health, industry, efficiency in the house and field, and proper care of the person. The girls, on the other hand, had little to say regarding the qualities they wanted in a husband. They seemed willing to accept whatever luck brought them. But marry they must.

584 574 883 There were many ways in which the husbands and wives had become acquainted with each other. If both had been born in Dragalevtsy, as was the case with a little more than half the couples, they were already aware of the other's characteristics either through personal acquaintance or hearsay. Many of the married couples had played together as children while tending the cattle in the sun-drenched pastures, only to become distant until most of the adolescent period passed. Then began frequent meetings at the fountain at sunset, shy flirtation at the *horo* and *sedenki,* or rambling conversation on the way to and from the Friday market. At the *sedenki,* held by the young people in various girls' homes on winter evenings, games involving forfeits were played. At one *sedenka* I attended, the girl giving out the penalties sent a couple obviously in love to the dark outdoors "to see what the weather was like." A few minutes later she sent a second couple out to see where the first had gone. All four of the

2: Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

second marriages were entered into because of convenience and necessity. But such tolerance was not shown to the previously unmarried. 587 837

In Dragalevtsy children married according to age, the oldest first. If a younger child wanted to marry before his brother, he had to buy permission, but in no case was a son or daughter supposed to have the customary wedding celebration before an older sister married, the only chance being an elopement followed by a very simple ceremony. 582

Most girls and men in Dragalevtsy married between the twentieth and the twenty-fifth year. At the time of the last census (1934) there were only one married man and eighteen married women under twenty. Men had begun to marry later than they had ten years before, although there seemed to be no such well-defined trend for the women.

Since marriage was the normal channel for sex expression, an enamored couple thought readily of a wedding. When they reached an understanding, they considered themselves engaged and sought parental approval. Of the thirty representative families that I studied, eighteen, or more than half, were engaged one week. Only two couples were engaged for longer than two weeks. 584

The engagement did not grant the couple any privileges of intimacy; indeed, the boy was not allowed to visit with the girl until the wedding. His sisters and relatives went to call upon her, or, if she had been stolen and was in his home, his parents kept the girl away from him until the day of the wedding. Therefore, the engagement period did not give the young couple any chance of getting better acquainted; it simply gave the families an opportunity to prepare for the wedding a week later. Whenever a wedding was to take place, someone usually sent a message to me at the College, and if possible I attended. As a foreigner I was attracted to those customs that were bizarre; so to offset this I persuaded three peasants of different ages and from different families to give me separately a complete description of the typical wedding. This showed me which points they thought most important and served as a check to my observations.

A wedding was a village affair, the parents of the girl inviting all of those who had previously invited them as well as those whose invitations they would like to receive. This meant the laying in of large 585

2:Sanders E-5 (no date) 1949 EE1 Bulgaria EE1

581 593 181 829 between a husband and wife, the proper relative intervened to suggest a way out. Most of the husband's relatives were in the same locality with him and could keep an eye on his behavior.

593 606 One was not only tied closely to the husband's blood kin *(rodstvo)* but had to enter upon a formal relationship with one's in-laws. Families related by marriage felt close to each other, the intensity of the feeling depending upon the frequency with which the families met and the way the young couples got along. Ordinarily, however, the family of the bride was considered by the husband's parents to be as close, at times even closer, than blood relatives. For instance, if there was any sort of celebration to which guests were invited, the family of the bride was the first to be asked. One reliable informant estimated that ninety out of one hundred people in Dragalevtsy felt the force of *svatovstvo,* or this relationship springing up through intermarriage. The young people, who are usually so prone to make a break with the past, maintained it in all its vigor. Here was the way one young man explained the *svatovstvo:*

"If my sister married some man in Simeonovo, even though I had never seen him before, his brother and sister would be my *svati,* and if I met them we would feel like cousins. I would never curse them or quarrel with them and would call their father *'dedo'* and their mother *'baba,'* the same names I use for my own grandparents. My parents and the parents of my new brother-in-law would likewise be *svati* and would treat one another reverently." Two brothers could not marry two sisters from another family, though there was no blood relationship, because the second couple were *svati* after the first couple married, and *svati* could not marry. Two brothers could marry two first cousins, but not two sisters. This feeling of closeness in families related by marriage did not stop with the husband and the wife, nor with the single in-law gained by each family. It included, as well, the in-law's parents and brothers and sisters with whom just dealings and proper behavior had always to prevail.

[582]

593 More than anything else, however, the shared activities of husband and wife developed an understanding which lasted through thick and thin. Some of these shared activities were the trip to market, the

Epiphany the godparent went to the home of his godchild, poured water on him or, in a rare case, pushed him into the river for the sake of his health during the coming year. On Cheese Sunday, however, the godchild went to his godparent's home with a gift and begged forgiveness for all sins committed during the year. On certain other holidays and special occasions the godchild was also supposed to pay his respects.

Some features of this bond between godparent and godchild were strange to one unfamiliar with the Orthodox Church. Behavior in the presence of godparents was highly formalized and correct. A person would not lie to his godparent; nor was he supposed ever to swear in his godparent's presence. These customs emphasized the mystical spiritual union which was supposed to exist between godparent and godchild.

Because the office of the godparent was hereditary, the same family provided godparents for the members of another family for generations. Consequently a feeling of strong relationship had come about. A godparent was considered one of the closest of relatives. "The godfather is closer than an uncle, and the godmother is closer than an aunt," the peasants used to say. Children of the two families could not marry even though madly in love, because, in the sight of the village, they were related. The taboo against marriage into the family of the mother's godparents further complicated matters. A woman, upon marriage, adopted the godparent of her husband, who assumed the same responsibility to the children of that couple as he did to the father. If a godparent was called upon to officiate at a wedding or a christening and was unable to attend, he could send one of his children to perform in his stead.

We have already seen the part that the godparents *(kumove)* played in the wedding ceremony.[1] The rite of christening revealed even more of the relationship between godparent and his spiritual ward. He went with a friend or relative to the infant's home, some two or three Sundays after its birth, and took it to the church. He had previously discussed the child's name with the parents and usually followed their wishes, but had the right to give the child any name he thought proper. In the case of the first son he was apt to follow the

[1] [See p. 89, category 116 -- Analyst]